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GHETTO SCHOOLS, AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY.

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IN THIS ARTICLE THE ATTITUDES OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TOWARD THEIR EXPERIENCES IN GHETTO SCHOOLS ARE SET FORTH, AND THE EFFECTS OF PUBLIC SCHOOL SEGREGATION ARE CATALOGED. THE RACISM IN AMERICAN SOCIETY AND THE EFFECTS OF SUMMER RIOTS ON EDUCATION ARE ALSO BRIEFLY DISCUSSED. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP," VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1967. (AF)

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Ghetto Schools—An American Tragedy

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AS THIS article is written, on this July day in Detroit, the city jails and state prisons are overflowing with more than 4,000 adults and 600 children who were arrested during the devastation here. Most of those people are Negroes and most of them have spent all or a large part of their school life in ghetto schools.

While the Detroit uprising was the most massive event of its kind in the nation's history, current counterparts throughout the country bespeak the widespread sickness of the cities. No small part of this sickness is caused by the failure of the schools—by the discrepancies between the stated purposes and the product. We who are responsible for what is taught are tempted to abdicate when a crisis occurs and the cancer of the slums is revealed in all its ugliness. We point the finger at irresponsible parents, entrenched politicians, disgruntled taxpayers, the government bureaucracy—at everyone except ourselves.

What has been happening in ghetto schools? Listen to students.

A Washington high school student was asked to write about something that interested him. He had dropped out of school and came back at the beginning of a new term. He wrote: "My interest is girls, booze and money, but the reason I came back is because I want my diploma. My diploma will help me very much in the future. My plan in the near future is to join the Air Force, and in order to join I have to have my diploma. After I finish my service career, my other three interests will go into effect."[1] School was not relevant to life and could contribute only a diploma.

The Children

The students who boycotted Northern High School in Detroit in April 1966 wanted teachers, courses and equipment equal to those which were available to white students in the schools outside the ghetto. In excerpts from student essays written in the Freedom School we read: "In an accelerated English course, in which only superior students are placed for supposedly 'enriched' English, we're getting the same or less than general English students. . . . Is this what's being taught at other public schools?" And "Too many teachers don't care about the students. They give us work and sometimes don't care if we get it or

[1] Janet Sideman. "Death of a Dropout." *The New Republic,* June 3, 1967. p. 11. Reprinted by permission of *The New Republic,* © 1967, Harrison-Blaine of New Jersey, Inc.

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not. They say that the black boys and girls don't want to learn, so therefore they don't put much in their jobs." And "In my biology class the teacher is most helpful and I learn a lot but we only have books. It isn't really a biology classroom, just a room."[2]

Young children speak too. The third grade teachers in two elementary schools, one inner-city and one suburban, planned shared learning opportunities for their classes. They paired the youngsters for getting acquainted and started the project with the exchange of pen pal letters. When the Negro children visited the suburban school for the first time, they arrived at morning recess time and the school yard was alive with children. The girl leaned against her teacher as they were leaving the bus and said, "But I don't want a *white* pen pal!"

A kindergarten child who is the central figure in a very poignant film, *5½—Reflections On An Age*,[3] says in a soliloquy as he gazes in the mirror, "God makes everybody different color 'cause if he made the whole world brown or white or yellow or tan then you wouldn't know who was who.... The mirror looks like it's your face and everything and you can see your hair. I think God has white skin. I don't like my curly hair. I don't look pretty. I don't like myself. I don't like myself."

The Teachers

What about teachers in ghetto schools? Those who find themselves there either by choice or by assignment are being propelled by circumstances which surround them, and by their personal responses to those conditions, in one of two directions.

Either they are convinced that they are engaged in an exercise in futility and are anxious to get out, or they are finding creative and concerned ways to reach and teach children. They are nearly all handicapped by their early education and upbringing and by the sterility of professional preparation in the colleges. Those who are making it in the ghetto schools have little support from administrators and colleagues. They are sustained chiefly by their students and, in the elementary schools, by parents and other concerned adults in the community. It is a rare ghetto school where faculty morale is high and where the principal and teachers are proud of their students.

Segregated schools in both white and Negro neighborhoods attempt to make all children fit the pattern of those with whom the schools have been "successful" in the past—middle class and conforming students. Learning tasks are selected for most children by teachers who have these kinds of expectations to start with. And in the ghetto schools the teachers revise their expectations downward because their assumptions are based on concepts like "culturally deprived" and "language handicap."

One elementary principal I visited recently tells the teachers in his ghetto school that *they* are the culturally deprived ones because they have not learned the culture of their children. So they start with learning the language, and the experience stories are written by the teachers in the exact language of the children. The children do not fail.

[2] "Students State Views." *Detroit Free Press*, April 27, 1966.

[3] Office for Audio-Visuals, United Church of Christ, 1501 Race St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19102.

Their language when they come to school is not "wrong."

Effects of Segregation

Recent research has told us a lot of things about the effects segregated schools have upon children. Is there very much here[4] that most teachers, principals and curriculum workers have not already known from experience and reading?

1. Despite the 1954 Supreme Court decision, American public education remains largely unequal in most regions of the country. Racial isolation is most severe in the metropolitan areas.

2. In all central cities, nonpublic schools absorb a disproportionately large segment of the white school population.

3. The quality of teaching has an important influence on the achievement of both advantaged and disadvantaged students. Negro students are more likely than white students to have teachers with low verbal achievement, to have substitute teachers, and to have teachers who are dissatisfied with their school assignment.

4. Negro students are critically influenced by the attitudes and aspirations of fellow students. Negroes in predominantly Negro schools frequently express a sense of inability to control their own destinies by their own choices.

5. Predominantly Negro schcols are generally viewed by the community as inferior schools.

6. The academic achievements and attitudes of Negroes improve the longer they remain in desegregated schools.

7. Racial isolation in schools limits job opportunities for Negroes.

8. Racial isolation is self-perpetuating. It generates attitudes in both Negro and white children which tend to alienate them from members of the other race.

There is one causal thread which runs through all of these statements. It is not generally accepted, admitted or understood by school people. It is that most white teachers, and many more Negro teachers than is generally assumed, and the vast majority of decision-makers in the upper echelons of our school systems are prejudiced against Negroes. They view Negroes as inferior persons. This is communicated in their behavior and attitudes. The word is racism. It is not peculiar to school people, but we are not immune. If the reader is inclined to protest, I would ask: How could we possibly escape this? In the foreword to Earl Conrad's book, *The Invention of the Negro*,[5] the author says:

> This book is therefore a look at history specifically as it relates to what the white man—English, European, and above all American—has done or failed to do for his Negro brother.
>
> A large portion of the white world has preferred for centuries to overlook this perspective; it may well be uncomfortable for our collective conscience. Yet it is a vital and essential one to explore if we are to grasp what we of the white world have done to bring about the present perilous period of racial turbulence and crisis in America.
>
> So in this work I have undertaken a special task: to describe how and by what

[4] U.S. Office of Education. *Equality of Educational Opportunity*, 1966; U.S. Civil Rights Commission. *Racial Isolation in the Schools*, 1967. See especially pp. 199-204 in *Racial Isolation in the Schools*.

[5] Earl Conrad. *The Invention of the Negro*. New York: Paul S. Eriksson, Inc., 1966.

means the white overworld designed, shaped and indeed invented the Negro in the image and likeness of a second-class human being.

We in the schools perceive ourselves as being fully committed to the ideals of democracy. We are unique in our humanity where children are concerned. But we have many blind spots about race. Like most "educated" Americans, we have not learned in schools or in life the truth about white oppression of Negroes, in history and in the present.

Progress in the Cities

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, with its Title IV stipulations about the desegregation of schools, gave some impetus to improving education for minority children. Prior to the past summer, events in local school districts, particularly racial strife and controversial school desegregation proposals and programs, brought some of the issues into focus in the major metropolitan areas.

For the first time there were public debates about neighborhood schools, segregated housing, etc. Now, events of this "long hot summer" of 1967 have shocked the nation. The voices of the ghetto have been heard. Letters to the editors and callers heard on "talk radio" stations indicate a polarization of opinion and behavior which reveals us to ourselves. The state of the nation is clearer, whether we like it or not.

Is there hope for improvement in the quality of education for the young victims of the ghetto? The answer is being shaped by the response of decision-makers in government, business and education to the anger and destruction which have erupted violently from the misery of the ghetto dwellers. That response will either bring the nation closer to apartheid, through repressive and punitive measures, or closer to *peaceful* solutions in which reason and compassion prevail. Basic, revolutionary change is in process and school leaders have begun to understand that not only the schools but all institutions are being challenged to affirm the principles of democracy and the Judeo-Christian ethic.

What about the response of teachers and principals and central administrators to the distressing events of the summer? Will schools be any different? The nature of the problems within the schools is no mystery. We do not need committees to study these problems. We need commitment and confrontation: commitment to achieving justice and equality for all persons, especially in our daily life in schools and communities, and confrontation of the problems in all their reality, even where this causes overt conflict and tension. And school people must make their commitment clear to colleagues and to the community. Each crisis, whether in the schools or in the streets surrounding the schools, provides opportunities for these qualities of leadership to be demonstrated.

School leaders are subject to conflicting demands and pressures greater than could have been imagined a short time ago. Our behavior is being "read" by our constituents. What they perceive will either intensify the crisis or help to fulfill the real needs of children and adults for humanity and integrity. We have no choice except to divest ourselves of our prejudices and devise successful learning tasks and opportunities for the children whom the ghettoes have created, so that they are able to come into the mainstream of American life now with confidence.